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Exploring Home Exchange in Greece: An alternative choice of vacation

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Introduction

From ancient times till now, exchange economy -an economy in which the exchange of goods (tangible and intangible) between economic entities occurs without mediation of money- has a universal appeal, being accepted as a key aspect of enhancing welfare of people (Andriotis and Agiomirgianakis, 2014). Especially, in times of economic downturn exchange economy can play an important role as it replaces money, when the currency is unstable or unsuitable for commercial use; thus exchange economy seems as a significant means through which basic needs are met and human ties are strengthened.

In this era of economic recession and within the context of finding alternative transaction modes, people have rethought their values, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and this has led -among others- to the need of alternative ways of travelling.

Travel is part not only of joy and relaxation but also of adventure, education and experience. A “new” or alternative tourism has been developed being consistent with quality vacations and authenticity. Home exchange is one of the most rapidly-growing forms of alternative tourism which implies that one partner travels at the same time as the other and stays at the primary residence of the other, without any services of travel mediators but with only cost being the loan of their own home (De Groote and Nicasi,

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1994). Following the idea of interchanging accommodation without a monetary exchange, home exchange developed into a successful global tourism phenomenon. However, very few studies have focused on home exchange as an alternative product on the tourism market and travelers who decide to take a vacation by exchanging their homes (Andriotis and Agiomirgianakis, 2014; De Groote and Nicasi, 1994; Forno et al., 2013). The aim of the research is to profile Greek home exchangers and investigate their motivations and travel habits. This research is considered as a first overview of the home exchange issue in Greece using quantitative research method.

Methodology

Subject And Procedure

A survey was conducted by collecting primary data during the spring of 2014, using a closeended type questionnaire. This research instrument was based on literature review and aimed at profiling Greek home exchangers and investigating their motivations and travel habits. The questionnaire was sent, via e-mail, to the total of 93 members of the most well-known Home Exchange Agency, HomeExchange.com, which has been established in Greece since 2012.

The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the research aim and follow-up telephone calls were conducted to confirm receipt of the questionnaires and answer any questions. Furthermore, respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be only used for research purposes. Totally, 44 valid responses were obtained corresponding to a response rate of 47%.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section gathered information about major sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age, educational level and family status. The second section concentrated on topics related to home exchangers' trip characteristics, motivations for choosing this form of tourism and activities during their vacation as well. Finally, in the third section, respondents' views about the importance of home exchange on sustainable development were examined.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for calculating the means and standard deviations of continuous variables, and the frequencies and percentages of categorical variables. Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS v.21.0 software.

Results

Findings showed that home exchange is a new choice, mainly for families (45%) and couples (34%), and highly educated travellers (82% had at least university education and 18% had attended high school). Most respondents (75%) had experienced this exchange system 1-5 times till the period of the research, compared with the 14% and the 11% of those who had this opportunity 6-10 times and 11-15 times, respectively. Most Greek home exchangers (80%) use to travel having exchange experiences 1-3 times per year, while 11% 4-6 times per year and 9% more than 6 times per year, respectively.

Europe is the most attractive exchange destination. More specifically, 98% greatly prefer to travel European countries while overseas destinations, such as Australia, Asia and Africa, are not preferred by the majority of the respondents. However, amongst 48% of the respondents USA is a popular travel destination. Finally, only 18% of Greek home swappers prefer to travel their country.

The research participants recognized that home exchange phenomenon is little known about. Information sources ranged from internet (77%) and television (70%) to personal experiences of friends (45%) and radio (27%) to a lesser extent. Home exchange is mainly considered of respondents as an “inexpensive vacationing” under economic crisis conditions; people have the opportunity to save money having almost free accommodation worldwide. This may be the most important motive that induces the 89% of respondents to exchange their home. Moreover, according to the respondents, they have the chance to live like local residents (84%), being involved in the local context, while they develop and maintain new relationships with neighbours (68%), greatly participate to local cultural events (41%) and taste local food (73%). Especially, Greek home exchangers consider that this form of tourism could significantly contribute to economic development of the area, enhancing local economy (64%) and give emphasis mainly to social values rather than individualism; a traveller whose values, attitudes and practices are built on the mindset of a conscious consumer and are hence connected to a more conscious form of travel.

In addition, natural environment (86%) and exchanging country's culture (75%) greatly affect respondents' destination choice, followed by country's history (70%) and cultural events (50%). Greek home exchangers seem to be greatly satisfied by this alternative product on the tourism market. More specifically, 54.5% of the respondents claimed that they are greatly satisfied, 43.2% reported that they are fairly satisfied, while only 2.3% indicated that they are moderately satisfied. Finally, most respondents (84%) would greatly prompt the public for travelling in that way.

Conclusions

Home exchange phenomenon allows for cost-efficient stays and embraces the concept of non market consumption that gives ground to human dimension and sustainability, away from the conventional tourism practices. Home exchange is in its infancy in

Greece. The potential longevity of it is associated with the high level of satisfaction among home exchangers. However, there is mainly a need for cultivation of trust and communication skills (Cheshire et al., 2010) in order Greeks being able to include this form of tourism in their travel plans. This requires open minded persons and a welcoming of new alternatives. This research can be of great interest to tourism providers and the general public.

Tourism providers may get a better understanding of alternative tourism practices through which they can mobilize tourism consumption, while the latter may get awareness of new low cost travelling ways which can be a pathway to authenticity, locality and sustainability. Our study may be considered as a first overview of the home exchange phenomenon in Greece using quantitative research method. Much research is going to be done using qualitative research techniques, such as in-depth interviews through which we can deeply explore travellers' thoughts, feelings and perspectives, and their behaviour outside a home exchange. Furthermore in the context of the potential of the phenomenon to frame conscious travel alternative, semi-structured interviews with travel experts may be proved valuable. Interviews with experts are an important step towards a deeper understanding of what characterizes conscious tourism within the context of home exchange. These approaches shed light on how the home exchange process embraces conscious actions and a more complete picture of the phenomenon is drawing.

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